



Cynthia Angeroth, MS, received her bachelor's degree in public relations and journalism from Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville and her master's degree in occupational therapy from the University of South Dakota in Vermillion. She has been an outreach coordinator at the Iowa School for the Deaf (ISD) since 1999. Questions and comments about this article are welcome and Angeroth will direct them to the individuals involved in ISD's transition program. She can be reached at cangeroth@iowaschoolforthedeaf.org.

Contributors:
Vicki Prigeon, MS, Joanne Shannon, BS, and Kristi Wills, MA, contributed to this article. Prigeon and Shannon teach transition and Wills, a certified work experience coordinator, is a 4PLUS teacher at ISD.

transition program pays off

iowa students learn to search for, find, and keep jobs

By Cynthia Angeroth

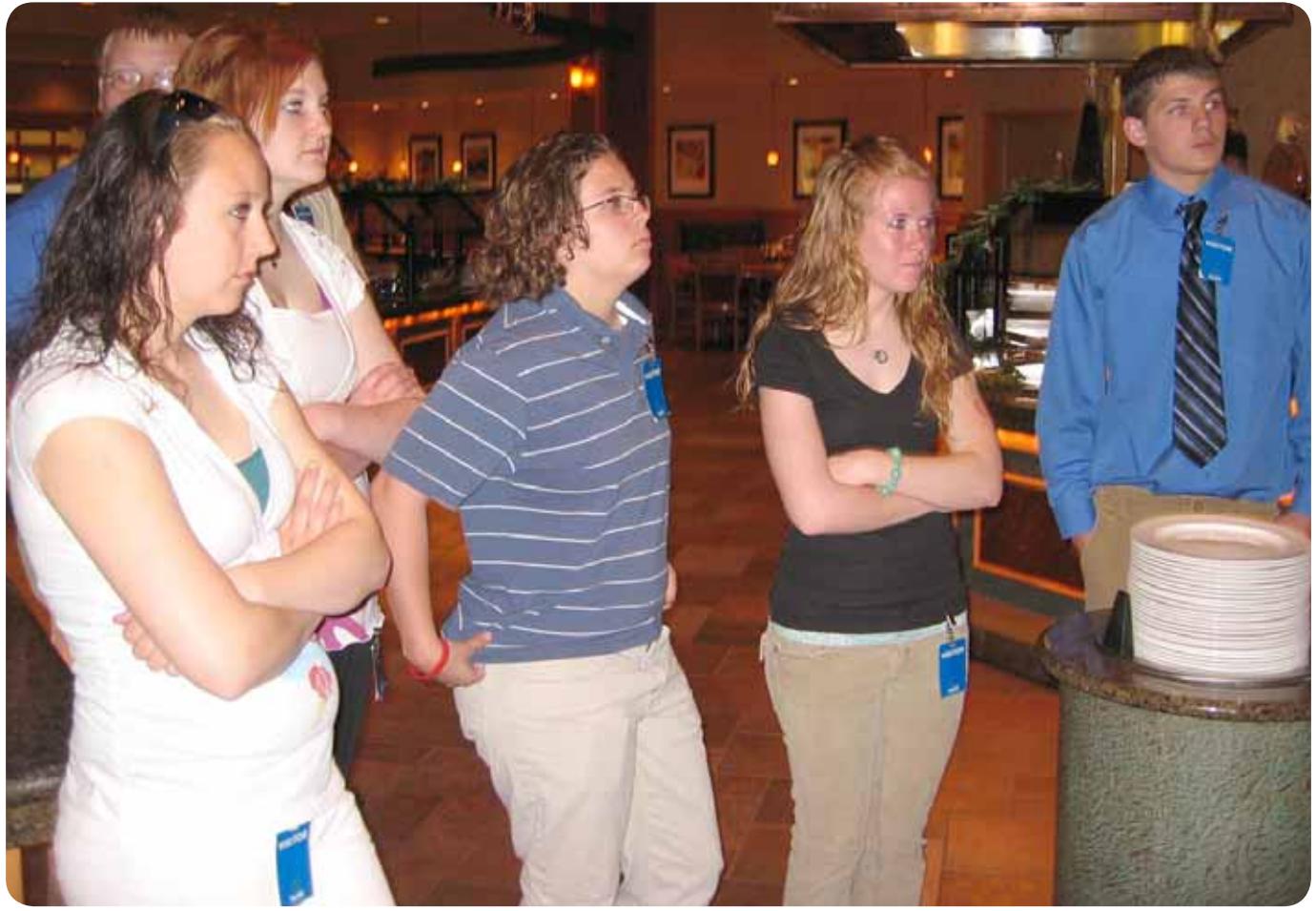
There is only a slim chance that one of Joanne Shannon's high school students will one day play professional football but, occasionally, that's the reply she gets when she asks students what they plan to do after graduation.

"It's easy for students to live in a fantasy world and think the sky is the limit, but the reality is that even getting that first job takes a lot of hard work," says Shannon, who co-teaches personal and career development (PCD) classes at the Iowa School for the Deaf (ISD). PCD classes, which began in the fall of 2005, are required for the school's ninth through twelfth graders. The goal is to ease transition from school to work and independent life. Under the leadership of Shannon and co-teacher Vicki Prigeon, the classes cover skill development in self-advocacy, finances, working with interpreters, social interaction, and independent living.

"We see a lot of changes in the students as they progress through the classes," Shannon said. "They will change their minds a million times about what kind of careers they want, but by the time they are juniors and seniors they no longer say they will be professional football players. Their plans become realistic."



Photos courtesy of the Iowa School for the Deaf



Above: Students participate in career building activities.

and relevant to each of their capacities."

Turning the realities of employment into positive experiences is part of the class emphasis. "If students are equally qualified, they need to know how to be determined about positions they can fill, and they have to learn to pursue those positions in a determined and respectful manner," said Shannon.

During class, students focus on strengths and skills related to work. They recognize their workplace strengths through various class exercises and skill inventories. They discuss the finer points of interviewing. However, nothing quite prepares students for the ambush interview day. Without warning, students expecting to settle in for their daily hour of lecture and discussion are instead greeted at the classroom door and told to complete real applications for mock interviews. The process is observed by Shannon and Prigeon, who evaluate everything from

the students' stance and posture when filling out paperwork, to their eye contact and body language, to how they respond to interview questions.

After the mock interview, one student admitted she often didn't know what to answer and even when she knew what to answer, she couldn't respond with sufficient swiftness. "That's okay," Shannon told her. "We can talk about interviewing," she added. "But unless you practice, you won't understand where your strong and weak areas are when you present yourself."

While teachers make sure students feel there's always support in their corner, they do not sugarcoat their observations. Prigeon and Shannon pepper their critique with frank comments geared to improving their students' future performances. "During the interview, you said you were fired from the grocery store," Prigeon reminded an ISD junior. "When

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they asked you why, you said because you didn't like your job—that's not a good enough answer. If you were the person asking the questions, what would you think if someone answered that way?" Prigeon waited as the student shrugged his shoulders. "Tell what you learned from getting fired," she urged him. "Say that it won't happen again."

Prigeon and Shannon emphasize that the students must educate prospective employers and coworkers about how best to communicate with them. "It'll be up to me to tell [my employers] that I have to see their mouths when they

talk, and that I can't focus on a conversation unless just one person speaks at a time," said an ISD senior. "I'll have to remind them because they'll probably forget." Remembering the mock interview, the senior added, "I'll ask them to stand in special places, let them know how to get my attention, and tell them that for me, if they stand in front of a bright window and talk, I probably won't get it."

Real Students Meet the Real World

The program doesn't just educate students within the confines of the ISD campus. There is strong emphasis on taking the students into the community. "It's not enough for students to remain in class and discuss what they should do for successful job searching," explained Prigeon. "After some preparation, we put the students in real outside environments with professionals who don't sign. We don't expect flawless experiences, but we do expect students to learn lessons for life in each situation."

The ISD students head off campus for simple tasks, such as obtaining job applications from area businesses, and more complicated tasks, such as undergoing mock interviews with unfamiliar members of the public. Of all the tasks the students must accomplish for the course, the interviews present the toughest challenge, explained Shannon.

Of course there's a huge distance between wanting a job and getting the interview, and another considerable gap between the interview and the job offer. "'Impress, impress, impress' is what

we're always stressing to students," said Prigeon. "The students have 30 seconds to put their best aspects on the line, and when they have to convince an employer that communication won't be a problem, they can't chance anything."

Initially students sometimes try to justify wearing flip-flops and jeans to "just get an application"; however, by the time they finish the course, students know professional attire is expected whether they are working, picking up an application, attending job fairs, shadowing employees, or practicing interviews with



Above: The students do a team building activity at the Iowa School for the Deaf.

campus staff. "They are applying what they learn in class," said Shannon. "Our older students know we expect professional dress, pleasant attitudes, and timely thank you notes."

In addition to the skills directly related to getting and keeping work, ISD's PCD classes assure students learn independent life skills—some of which come as a shock to young people who have lived primarily in the care of their parents. "So I have to pay the whole rent, even if my roommate just decides to move out?" asked a student in disbelief. Further discussion focuses on tenant/landlord laws, researching utility deposits, and the costs of living independently. "It is an eye-opening experience for our students," said Prigeon.

This fall, the senior PCD class met with a realtor and toured several houses on the market. The students also took a trip to the county courthouse and saw where people pay property taxes.

"Our goal was for them to know how to use each department in the building," said Prigeon. But the trip had an unexpected bonus: "They were asking what kinds of jobs were available for them that they could realistically do," said Shannon. "They are thinking about their futures, about what they will be doing."

In Line to Succeed

Already the program has chalked up success. One of the most timid students in the 2008 senior class landed a position in a discount clothing store. Last summer, a student who had just finished his junior year got a job at a nationally franchised restaurant in his hometown. "I knew how to dress when getting the application, what to write, and how to get an interpreter," he said. "I felt confident when I explained why they should hire me." He worked up to 32 hours a week until school started in September, and he fills in when he is home on breaks.

"So much of what we do in this country is tied to our work," said Prigeon. "Where we live depends on where we work. What we drive is

tied to what we do. The thread of work runs through just about every aspect of daily living. ISD grads know it's going to be tough for them out there." She smiled. "And they'll be ready."



4PLUS = Lots More

The Iowa School for the Deaf (ISD) opened 4PLUS, a program to help its deaf and hard of hearing graduates succeed in living and working independently, in 2006. 4PLUS, an acronym for Post-secondary Learning for Ultimate Success, provides a full array of services—from job shadowing and job placement, to enrolling in college, to one-on-one tutoring. To enter 4PLUS, a student must have completed his or her high school credits but not yet graduated; graduation is contingent on completing the 4PLUS program, which usually continues for two years or until the student turns 21 years old. Eligibility for the program is documented as a need in his or her Individualized Education Program.

Students enrolling in the work-only part of the program must be able to work independently. Students who enroll in college have their tuition paid by their home school district and their room, board, one-on-one services, and transportation financed by ISD. Although originally designed for ISD's senior students, the program does accept mainstream students who have not previously been enrolled at ISD. Currently, the 13 students who have been through the 4PLUS program have experienced most of their high school years at ISD. Those who pursue jobs (rather than college) average 16 hours a week on the job. Jobs have included retail, parcel delivery, and restaurants; students sort clothing, bus tables, assist at a carpentry warehouse, and work in

an animal shelter. Those pursuing college degrees average 10 to 12 credits per semester in the community colleges (participants can enroll at one of two local schools). Their fields of study include education, building trades, and architecture. Some students are enrolled in college while also holding part-time jobs.

Kristi Wills has been teaching with the program since its beginning. She recalled a crisis early in the first fall when a student's classes were about to be canceled. "It was due to a simple miscommunication," she said. "If 4PLUS hadn't been there, the student would have dropped out of college because she didn't understand how to work with the registrar."

Wills and co-teacher Wendy Rustad help students apply for college, provide tutoring, and teach lessons in life skills. "Most college freshmen are stressed and overwhelmed at first. Throw in the factor of difficulty with communication and it can cause them to quit school."

For more information about the 4PLUS program, contact Wills or Rustad at kwills@iowaschoolforthedeaf.org or wrustad@iowaschoolforthedeaf.org.

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